

# Nietzsche: The Last Word?

By Marcel C. Ernst

Why another essay on this lonely misfit, whose pseudo-philosophical pronouncements have confused as much as enlightened? Five primary reasons come to mind:

1. Common places of residence: I was born and grew up in Basel, Switzerland, where Nietzsche taught for ten years (1868-78). This one-time humanist centre harboured many of the uprooted and persecuted, including the first Zionist World Congress in 1897.
2. In the late 1970s I bought a German *Taschenbuch* about his life, without understanding much of what he was about. But like him, I considered myself a free spirit.
3. During undergrad studies at Carleton University in 1984 I wrote an essay (since lost) on Nietzsche, not doing justice to the topic. I completed the assignment as part of course requirements for *Introduction to the History of Ideas*, taught by Professor D. G. Bowen, who retired in April 1985. Also influential in developing ideas on the topic was Professor Laforest's course on political theory at the University of Calgary, taken during the 1986-87 academic year. The intervening years have added life and reading experience, recently accelerated by the acquisition of an E-Reader.
4. Some of Nietzsche's pronouncements foreshadowed many crucial events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The rise of communism and fascism, environmentalism, Freud's psychological analysis, and the search for new scientific paradigms to explain evolution and the universe as a whole.
5. Recent economic difficulties in the Euro countries have led to an increase in support for right-wing political movements, and consequently, revived interest in Nietzsche's fiery rhetoric. Through the Internet and facebook, quotes taken out of context can be quickly transmitted. This development reconfirms the importance of once more setting the record straight.

The essay tackles key topics touched on in Nietzsche's writings, and positions these in context: Human evolution, instinct and will to power, environmental ethics, and governance. Finally, I attempt to answer the questions of his relative importance and relevance today, and conclude with a note on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

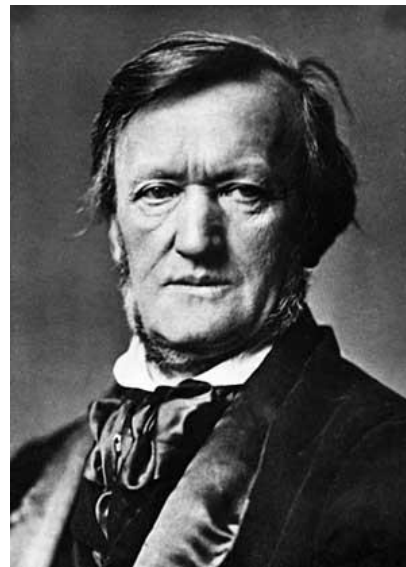
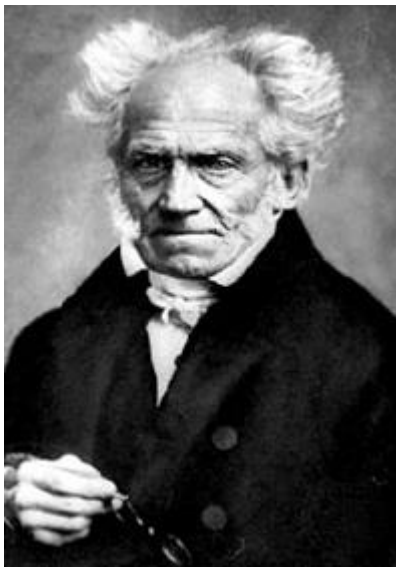


## Life

Ideas cannot be understood without an appreciation of their originator's circumstances. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born near Leipzig in October 1844, and named after the German Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who shared a birthday with him. His father Carl Ludwig was a Lutheran Pastor who died in 1849 when Friedrich was only five. Growing up without a father figure affected him profoundly. He had a sister who survived him by 35 years: Elisabeth (1846-1935). She became known by her hyphenated married name Förster-Nietzsche.

Nietzsche abandoned studies in Theology at the age of 20, having concluded that history did not bear out Christian teachings. He then took up studies in philology, the study of language in written historical resources.

Friedrich read Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in 1865 and studied his philosophy in detail (pictured below at left). Darwin's evolutionary theories and the intellectual revolt against authority also greatly influenced him. Nietzsche met Wagner (below right) for the first time in 1867, and became a disciple, although he later distanced himself, partially due to the latter's Pan-Germanism and anti-Semitism.



Thanks to a professor's recommendation Nietzsche was offered a teaching post at the University of Basel at the age of 24, prior to receiving a doctorate or a teaching certificate. He published his first book in 1872, but *Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy), a work on philology was poorly received. In 1878 he followed up with *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (Human, All-Too Human), a publication of original thoughts on metaphysics and morality. The year after that he was forced to resign his professorship due to poor health, and spent the rest of his active life as a travelling philosopher, spending summers in southern Switzerland and winters in Italy.

During the next ten years he wrote *Morgenröte* (The Dawn), *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science), *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil), *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *The Case of Wagner*, *Götzendämmerung* (Twilight of the Idols), and *The Antichrist*. His sister published *Der Wille zur Macht* (The Will to Power) after his death.

In January 1889 he suffered a mental breakdown, became insane and spent the remainder of his days in institutions as well as his mother and sister's care. According to contemporary

opinion the mental incapacity resulted from syphilis. Video footage on *You Tube* dating from this period shows him listless, staring emptily into space. He died in August 1900 as a result of a stroke.



Through his sister Nietzsche's life and work received a somewhat dubious extension. Elisabeth put words in her brother's mouth that were not his. She had created the Nietzsche archive in 1894, and taken over his care in 1897. Although a widow at that time, she had apparently fallen under the spell of her anti-Semitic husband, Bernhard Förster (1843-89). Her association with him had been a source of considerable friction among the siblings.

The Wikipedia entry concludes:

*Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche compiled The Will to Power from Nietzsche's unpublished notebooks, and published it posthumously. Because his sister arranged the book based on her own conflation of several of Nietzsche's early outlines, and took great liberties with the material, the consensus holds that it does not reflect Nietzsche's intent.*

In her capacity of literary executor Elisabeth initiated and guided the Nietzsche cult during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Power* became known as his philosophical testament. In 1912 she also published a biography on her brother.

Towards the end of her life she became a supporter of the German National Socialists, and Hitler personally attended her funeral in 1935.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1921 the University of Jena awarded her an honorary *Doctor of Philosophy*.

## Friedrich Nietzsche's Works

Nietzsche's output can be divided into three major phases:

1. 1869-78; Richard Wagner inspired his early works, among them *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Die Unzeitgemässigen* (Thoughts out of Season).
2. 1878-82; *Human, All-Too Human* marked his turning away from Wagner. He completed the book with the assistance of Johann Heinrich Köselitz (1854-1918), whom he gave the pseudonym Peter Gast.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche was also influenced by Paul Rée's philosophy and psychological outlook (The Gay Science).
3. 1883-89; With *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche signalled his isolation and rejection of former influences. To some extent this frame of mind came about after Lou Salomé had turned down his offers of marriage. This final flurry of activity also included *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and the autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, the last work completed before his breakdown.<sup>3</sup>

Despite many struggles with physical frailty, poor eyesight and illness, Nietzsche retained a certain sense of humour, as the posed photograph from 1882 with Salomé (brandishing a whip) and Rée demonstrates:



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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia says of him: From 1899 to 1909, Köselitz worked in Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's "Nietzsche-Archiv" in Weimar. There, he was partly responsible for the selective and misleading editions of Nietzsche's work.

<sup>3</sup> He retained some friendships, including the Theology Professor Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), who rushed to his aid when he received news of Nietzsche's mental breakdown. Overbeck also zealously guarded their mutual correspondence against Elisabeth's attempts to acquire it.

## Nietzsche on Human Evolution

Coming from a family that produced 20 clergymen in five generations, Nietzsche was exposed to issues relating to human destiny from an early age. In 1886 he published *Beyond Good and Evil*, which offers insight on humanity's precarious evolutionary journey:

*Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Uebermensch – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde.*

Extrapolating from man's lowly origins, he sees human evolution as halfway between animal and the complete human, but precariously so. As Nietzsche sees it, mankind could tumble off the rope perched between savagery and civilization at any moment. Nietzsche thus takes a page from Charles Darwin (1809-82), whose *Origin of Species* had first been published in 1859, when Nietzsche was a teenager of 15 years. *The Descent of Man* followed in 1871.

An artistic creation by Peter Lenk pictured below illustrates the idea quite nicely.



This prescient pronouncement found its fulfillment with World War I and the Nazis, many of whom worshipped Nietzsche, misre-presented in *Will to Power*, just like the French revolutionaries had sought to put Rousseau's *Social Contract* into practice, with bloody results.

At the same time, the analogy of the rope goes to the core of existentialist philosophy. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) has been cited as the father of existentialism. His most famous book, *The Sickness unto Death*, and his attacks upon Christianity suggest that Nietzsche was also influenced by him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The French philosopher and 1927 Nobel Prize winner Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941) took a more positive view with his term *Élan Vital*, introduced in *Creative Evolution* (1907). The concept has been defined as "kind of vital impetus which explains evolution in a less mechanical manner, as well as accounting for the creative impulse of mankind."



Nietzsche's contemporary Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was more creative in incorporating evolutionary theories into his work, particularly his synthetic philosophy. Spencer coined the term "Survival of the Fittest."

But Nietzsche rejected such optimism and methodology as a whole. He ridiculed Plato and other classical philosophers, as well as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the author of *Critique of Pure Reason*, even though much of his printed views show indebtedness to their ideas. He further criticized the "innocence" of the assumption that moral philosophers are disinterested or impartial in their quest for knowledge.

Philosophy is certainly not value-free. But should the quest for enlightenment result in the advocacy of society's downfall? Man may not be the measure of all things, yet human reasoning is all we have to date, supplemented in recent years by artificial intelligence.

Pessimism about human nature pervades Nietzsche's writings. Few are destined to lead, but unlike Plato, the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* does not provide a clear blueprint on how to foster leadership and thus guide further human evolution. Despite modifications in some of his opinions, Nietzsche essentially remained an aristocratic radical throughout his active life.<sup>5</sup> He believed that strong leadership was more important than accountability or democracy in guiding mankind. On several occasions he referred to the masses as "das Herdentier" (the herd animal). This ruler-subject mentality opens the door to tyranny. Ghaddafi, Pinochet, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot represent the *Superman* who wreaked havoc in societies lacking strong administrative structures.

On the other hand Nietzsche took a European perspective, admired French culture and worried that Bismarck's Reich devoured all dedication to intellectual matters.

His final word on breeding a better humanity can be found in *Ecce Homo* (1889):

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<sup>5</sup> The Danish Philosopher Georg Brandes (1842-1927) used the term in the title of his book *Nietzsche: Eine Abhandlung über aristokratischen Radicalismus*.

*Jene neue Partei des Lebens, welche die grösste aller Aufgaben, die Höherzüchtung der Menschheit in die Hände nimmt, eingerechnet die schonungslose Vernichtung alles Entarteten und Parasitischen, wird jenes Zuviel von Leben auf Erden wieder möglich machen...*

This Nietzsche presents as humanity's salvation, should his attack on two thousand years of living against nature and molestation of humans succeed. His solution is mandated eugenics and the ruthless elimination of all degenerates and parasites to restore richness of life on earth. This passage could have been taken out of the Nazi's final solution.

Whether Nietzsche was in full command of his faculties when he wrote these lines, completed three months before his breakdown, is another question.

## **Human Instinct and Will to Power**

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) Nietzsche says: *Man muss noch den grössten Teil des bewussten Denkens unter die Instinkt-Tätigkeiten rechnen...*

Partially due to Paul Ree's influence, Nietzsche thus recognizes the force of Freud's Id, the brainstem, the nightmare of all rationalists.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he attacked Christianity for having made something unclean out of sexuality, recognizing like Freud its prominence in human thinking and action. Recent headlines involving Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Silvio Berlusconi, and others reaffirm the power of the irrational over many of the powerful.

Also in *Beyond* he proposed the Will to Power concept to explain all effective power. But the will remains theoretical and heuristic (or ontological, as philosophers might call it), not a call to action like with Marx. Nietzsche thus moves beyond his "great teacher" Schopenhauer. He further spoke of long-term church or court-imposed subjugation of the free spirit, contrary to reason (Widervernünftig). But at the same time, he viewed obedience as moral imperative of nature. Such apparent contradictions occur in a number of works. But they might have simply reflected the evolution of his thinking.

The following table describes how the role of the will in human affairs developed and evolved among five writers. Jean-Jacques Rousseau first popularized the term General Will (*volonté générale*) in the *Social Contract*, published in 1762.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rée's works include *Psychologische Beobachtungen* (1875), *Der Ursprung der moralischen Empfindungen* (1877), and *Die Illusion der Willensfreiheit* (1885). Particularly 1887's *The Genealogy of Morals* appears to have been inspired by Rée.

<sup>7</sup> The concept *volonté générale* was used fairly commonly during his times, and might have originated with Montesquieu (1689-1755).

Writer	Lifespan	Pivotal Events	Function of Will	Emphasis
Rousseau	1712-78	Divine right of kings; American Revolution	General Will: Concept of Republic	GW overrides individual rights
Hegel	1770-1831	Excesses of French Revolution, 1789-99  1806: Prussian defeat at Jena – no German unity	State = Expression of universal will	Political tool for unification
Schopenhauer	1788-1860	Revolutions of 1848 and subsequent reaction	Something negative to be suppressed	Psychological; renounce will
Nietzsche	1844-1900	1859: <i>Origin of Species</i> ; 1870: Formation of German Reich	Will to power basic to life force, must be acknowledged	Biological
Hitler	1889-1945	German defeat in WWI; Depression of 1920s	Triumph of the will essential; submit	Political tool of Fascism

As can be seen, the above changed emphasis in response to key events that shaped their era. The French revolutionaries used Rousseau's Social Contract as blueprint for governing (primarily Robespierre), but attempts to implement the General Will resulted in the Reign of Terror. As a consequence, Hegel represented the state as an expression of universal will, leaving *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* out of the picture. Schopenhauer became disillusioned with both of these nationalistic approaches and preached withdrawal into the self instead.

In Nietzsche, the will becomes a biological concept, represented by the sperm cell that conquers thousands of competitors to fertilize the egg, the will to being. Finally, Hitler, in a throwback to Rousseau and Hegel, turned the will into an anti-intellectual tool to promote racism and fascism.<sup>8</sup> Due to the resulting second reign of terror by the Nazis, intellectuals and politicians have avoided the subject like the plague since 1945.

Promoting racism and fascism had not been Nietzsche's intent. Instead, he criticized the loss of German intellectual vigour in Bismarck's Reich, specifically the reputation of the *Volk von Dichtern und Denkern* (a people of poets and thinkers). Like Schopenhauer before him, he advocated personal moderation in *Ecce Homo* (1889): The choice of nutrition, location and climate, and recreation are crucial, promoted by the self-preservation instinct.

Who matters in governance? Nietzsche wrote that essential philosophers are those who command and compile laws.<sup>9</sup> They determine the **where to** and **why** of humanity, and grasp for the future with a creative hand. Nietzsche asked: Must we not have such philosophers? The importance of their task has been to be the bad conscience of their time. This role he previously assumed himself in *Untimely Reflections*, where he warned that the creation of the German Reich in 1870 might result in the extirpation of the German spirit. Considering the propaganda poster below one wonders whether he was not right.

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<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell wrote that Henri Bergson, William James and John Dewey also saw the doctrine of the will as paramount.

<sup>9</sup> Befehlende und Gesetzgebende





Nietzsche lamented that will power becomes weakened and watered down by the current tastes and virtues; nothing is as timely as weakness or feebleness of the will. He went on to mock the equality of rights that honours the mentality of the herd.<sup>10</sup> Equality of rights, he feared, could easily evolve into an equality of wrongs: A resulting war on outsiders, strangers, and higher souls as well as duties or responsibilities.

The ideal human beyond good and evil masters the excesses of the will. Nietzsche asked whether such greatness was possible. He opposed leftist aspirations to end exploitation in society. To him, this was the same as to create life without organic functions. No, exploitation represents part of the essence of all living things – a consequence of the Will to Power.

At the same time, power by itself could be a bad thing. Nietzsche wrote in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), referring to the creation of Bismarck's Reich: *Die Macht verdummt die Deutschen* (power dulls the minds of Germans). He went on to say that Christianity, alcohol and music undermined the vitality of the German spirit. Culture and state are presented as antagonists; German universities produced officers, not philosophers.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche's denouncement of a priori reasoning as false confirmed his irrationalism. Such pronouncements led to the logical positivist attempt during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led by Bertrand Russell to restore logic as a basis for decision-making.

Nietzsche was not alone in unmasking the failure and impotence of conventional philosophy to change society. Proudhon (1809-65, the first to call himself an anarchist), Bakunin (1814-76) and Marx (1818-83) also called for radical methods to effect change. Marx's *Communist*

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<sup>10</sup> In German: Das Herdentier.

<sup>11</sup> In *Ecce Homo*, he comments: Der deutsche Geist ist eine Indigestion, er wird mit Nichts fertig.

*Manifesto*, published during the revolutionary year 1848, struck authoritarian rulers across Europe like a thunderbolt.

But how are destructive instincts tamed in civilized society? Nietzsche does not tell us. In his view, might makes right. The French Revolution with its bloodletting was justified in order to make way for Napoleon. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) disliked Nietzsche "because he likes the contemplation of pain, because he erects conceit into a duty, because the men whom he most admires are conquerors, whose glory is cleverness in causing men to die."

Yet, serious consideration of limits to rationality can be helpful in decision-making. The historian Barbara Tuchmann elaborated on the historical recurrence of governments pursuing policies evidently contrary to their own interests in *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984). Overconfidence and trying to save face has led many of the high and mighty to their doom. Many of humanity's caveman instincts have survived and contributed to disasters. These shortcomings must be acknowledged and accounted for. The American system of checks and balances (executive, legislature, and judiciary) provides an example of countervailing powers to mitigate individual abuses.

### **Nietzsche's Environmental Ethic**

The philosopher and Nietzsche contemporary Bertrand Russell saw his influence strongest in ethics and criticism of religion. The ethics are most clearly delineated in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1885) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). In the former, the hero figure proclaims:

*Ich beschwöre Euch, meine Brüder, bleibt der Erde treu, und glaubt denen nicht, welche euch von überirdischen Hoffnungen reden! Giftmischer sind es, ob sie es wissen oder nicht...*

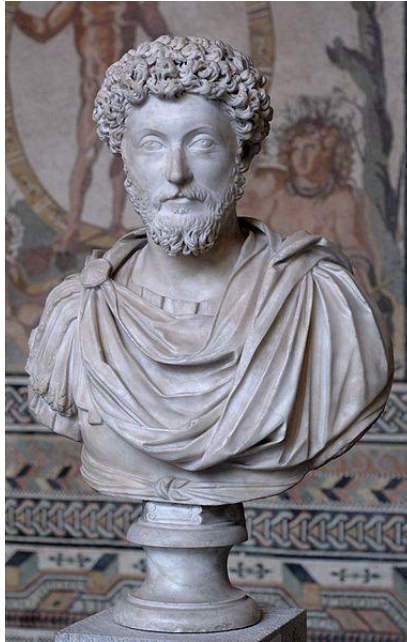
*Einst war der Frevel an Gott der grösste Frevel, aber Gott starb, und damit auch diese Frevelhaften. An der Erde zu freveln ist jetzt das Furchtbarste und die Eingeweide des Unerforschlichen höher zu achten, als der Sinn der Erde!*

He thus presents mankind as blight upon the face of the earth:

*Wahrlich, ein schmutziger Strom ist der Mensch. Man muss schon ein Meer sein, um einen schmutzigen Strom aufnehmen zu koennen, ohne unrein zu werden. (page 6)*

In *Zarathustra*, caring for the destiny of earth therefore supplants worship of divinity. This is the new purpose of mankind. But humans have been "a polluted stream," whose environmental impact has been limited only due to the largesse of the hemisphere. Nietzsche was not the first intellectual to characterize the human challenge this way.

Stoicism in ancient Greece, beginning in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, held similar views of a sage who would not be subject to destructive emotions which resulted in errors of judgement. Their philosophy consisted of three main components: Physics, logic and ethics. Conforming life to nature was the Stoic idea of virtue, which Nietzsche mocked in BGAE. A common feature is the anti-Christian outlook of Stoics, including the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (120-180, bust below), even though the two could not have been more different in every other aspect.



The classical Stoics would likely have disowned Nietzsche on account of his ill-temper. He also departed from conventional logic and ethics in his exaltation of untruth and deception. The concept of virtue did not find favour with Nietzsche, and the idea of a common good remained alien to his elitist thinking.

Zarathustra obsessed over bringing about the downfall (Untergang) of the status quo. But he did not elaborate on what would replace it. Living according to the laws of nature applies to societies in extreme conditions, such as the traditional Inuit, where the old left the tribe to die of exposure, to avoid using scarce food resources. In industrial and post-industrial society this dictum is far too easily misused as a blueprint for social Darwinism. Indeed, purging the weak and infirm from society became one of the horrible legacies of the Third Reich (1933-45).

Nietzsche praised the mastery of the free spirit in *Human, All-Too Human*. Freed from the tyranny of religion, man could do justice to the earth. But he also recognized that natural laws can be cruel and unforgiving. He did not share Rousseau's exaltation over an idyllic state of nature.

Jack London (1876-1916) eloquently described the terror of nature's fury in the *Sea Wolf*, as experienced by the hapless protagonist. Although London presented an essentially nihilistic perspective in the work, he balanced it with a backdrop of rationalistic discourses.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche's works do not offer such balance. They remained mostly polemics, although some passages prove he was capable of rational analysis. He would have had a more positive impact if he had discussed social issues more dispassionately.

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<sup>12</sup> The conversations between Van Weyden and the Captain, Wolf Larsen, in the *Sea Wolf*

## On Governing (*Ein Blick auf den Staat*)

In *Human, All-Too Human* (1878) Nietzsche took a look at the state. He distrusted human reason, quoting Voltaire: *Quand la populace se mêle de raisonner, tout es perdu*. He tolerates party politics, but some must be allowed to abstain from mass politics and step aside, to stay silent when too many talk.<sup>13</sup>

After praising the capacity to proudly obey, along with the gift to command, he sees the decline of subordination as a loss of state foundations. However, Nietzsche also regrets the sacrifice of the educated in army service, primarily because their loss will result in fewer good descendants.

Preserving the higher strata of society is thus a higher task than the Roman conception of country and honour. War makes winners stupid and losers resentful. But war also provides a hibernation period for cultural life, and citizens come out of it strengthened in their convictions.

Nietzsche apparently discounts the concept of innate rights; power and contracts determine those. No contract, no right. He further criticizes press power, encumbered with few obligations or ties. A well-supported and financed opinion could thus be manipulated to form a public opinion. The tone of publicized complaints he saw as too shrill, and regretted the exaggeration of issues which prompts investigations and reprisals. He did not view it in term of counterbalancing the powers-that-be.

In governance, autocracy goes hand in hand with religion. The latter provides a safety valve for the disaffected. Nietzsche argued that socialists seek to compensate for lack of religion in their system by increasing state power and control, although they take care not to advertise that fact in their propaganda. This was a prescient assessment; during his era, the only example of a socialist government was the short-lived Paris Commune of 1870.

Nietzsche also correctly reasoned that decline of state authority in democracies leads to a decrease in religious control. Ultimately, this culminates in a withering away of the state and the emergence of a European identity, as has happened in recent years with the EU.

Hard-working and intelligent, the Jews make for a good addition to the European mixed race of the future in his opinion. The Jews also helped prevent the mohammedization of Europe. Nietzsche deplored the tendency of particularly nationalist governments to continue scapegoating the Jews.

Then he turns around and glorifies war as necessary to renew national cultures. This appears to be a glaring inconsistency in his thinking. It is also erroneous. The historian in Nietzsche should have realized that cultural flowering primarily occurred during times of peace, including the Renaissance and Germany's *Sturm und Drang* movement, led by Goethe and Schiller. Having quoted Voltaire, he should have adopted the latter's denunciation of war also.

Worse, Nietzsche advocates barbarization during war as a necessary cleansing for cultural revival. The Thirty Years War certainly did not do that. And Confederate soldiers most likely did not think that General Sherman's scorched earth campaign promoted southern culture in 1864-65. With the massacre of the Civil War in recent memory, it is hard to understand why Nietzsche held these views, despite ample empirical evidence to the contrary in his own day.

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<sup>13</sup> By implication, he thus also tolerated elections in the Bismarck Reich, even though he does not discuss their conduct.

His British contemporary Spencer commented: "The possibility of a high social state fundamentally depends on the cessation of war."<sup>14</sup>

And what about governing to improve lives? Nietzsche expressed contempt for the utilitarian concept of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Consequently, he does not attempt to sketch what he views as the good life in an alternative society. Plato did so in the Republic, Aristotle in the Politics, Thomas Aquinas with City of God, and Rousseau (pictured) with the Social Contract, although none of these works argued that democracy was necessarily the way to achieve it.



The Stoic Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius elaborated: *A happy lot and portion is good inclinations of the soul, good desires, good actions.*<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche talks little about happiness, and when he does, it is in terms of self-delusion before demise. Zarathustra's last people say "we have invented happiness." None of the good inclinations, desires and actions mentioned by Marcus Aurelius can be found in Zarathustra or any other of its author's works. Worse, Nietzsche mocks such aspirations.

The cynic commits intellectual suicide. Dr. Karl Popper (1902-94), author of the 1945 Book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, provided an excellent rebuttal the cynical interpretation of history near the end of his life: "I consider it a compelling duty to fight against it, for how we think about ourselves and our history is important... for our decisions and our actions."<sup>16</sup>

Russell concluded in 1946: *Nietzsche's political philosophy is analogous to that of The Prince, though it is worked out and applied over a wider field. Both Nietzsche and Machiavelli have an ethic which aims at power...* Another common trait among the two is that they saw deception as a legitimate means to rule and exert control over the weak.

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<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Will Durant, The Story of Philosophy

<sup>15</sup> Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

<sup>16</sup> *Against What May be Called the Cynical Interpretation of History*, Sir Karl Raimund Popper, 1993

To be sure, Nietzsche was no Pan-Germanic fanatic. He left Bismarck's Prussia in 1868, shortly after the war with Austria-Hungary, although he returned to serve in a medical capacity during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. We have seen that he did not welcome the ensuing proclamation of German re-unification and formation of the Reich, fearing what it would do to the German spirit, or soul.

But lack of diplomacy, reflected in his writings, led to social isolation. Most notorious remains the falling out with the German composer and early mentor Richard Wagner (1813-83), one of many burned bridges. Nietzsche's failure to form any meaningful relationships with women also suggests unwillingness to compromise for the sake of mutual benefit.

Criticism comes easy to those who never held substantial positions of authority or responsibility. A professorship at the University of Basel does not qualify in this regard. Like his younger contemporary Vincent Van Gogh (1851-90), Nietzsche embarked on a downward spiral of social alienation to loneliness and isolation, culminating in mental breakdown. Man is a social animal, and requires the sustenance of others. Both men's fates also demonstrated the thin line between genius and insanity.



### Relative Importance

Intellectually, Nietzsche bridged the gap between Darwin and Freud, by his recognition of man's ongoing evolution and associated problems. His analogy of the rope between animal and superman illustrates this prescience. Instinct can guide reasoning as much as Freud's Superego.

Nietzsche's own prejudices are reflected in his works. He did not provide a comprehensive solution to the issues he raised. That made him an intellectual anarchist, similar to Bakunin or more recently, Paul Feyerabend (1924-94), who wrote *Against Method*.

De-constructing prevalent social philosophy has been a recurrent theme since Socrates, through to Rousseau and Schopenhauer. But most of Nietzsche's precursors put dialectic in place, a creative process for which he expressed contempt. Cooperation and collaborative efforts must be at the core of reconstructing social philosophy and arriving at a new ethic.

Nietzsche failed at this because he was a misfit, a one-man show whose works did not sell. The French *Philosophes* smile of reason did not appear on his lips. He cannot be ranked of the



same order as a Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, More, Machiavelli, Locke, or Rousseau. In Plato's *Republic*, Nietzsche would have likely played the role of Thrasymachus, the smooth-talking Sophist bested by Socrates. The lack of logic in his arguments would have been his downfall.

Among 19<sup>th</sup> century social thinkers, he does not make the top five either, if we consider the following list (in no particular order):

Name	Country	Principal Work/s and Influence
Auguste Comte (1798-1857)	France	Sociology/Positivism
James Madison (1751-1836)	United States	Federalist papers/US Bill of Rights
Georg Hegel (1770-1831)	Prussia	German Idealism, dialectic
John Stuart Mill (1806-73)	Great Britain	On Liberty/Principles of Political Economy
Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)	Great Britain	First Principles/Principles of Ethics

Published the same year as Darwin's *Origin of Species*, John Stuart Mill's treatise *On Liberty* (1859) presents the most eloquent argument for a free society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In it, Mill makes a most important qualification to his discussion:

*The subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will... but Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.*



Thus Mill (pictured) strips Nietzsche's concept of a key role in society. Quite likely, the latter's Zarathustra would have been the rough equivalent of Mill's *king of the vultures*.

Even among German writers and social critics Nietzsche does not rank in the top ten: Von Humboldt, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Leibnitz, Friedrich von Schiller, Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann, Martin Heidegger, Berthold Brecht, and Karl Popper. All of them left a comprehensive, well-organized body of work superior to Nietzsche.

Who did the author of *Human, All-Too Human* appeal to? Neither the common man, nor the conventional philosopher, nor political decision-maker – so who's left? He addressed his observations to radicals and misfits like himself. Which fanatics fell under Nietzsche's spell? Did the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose deed resulted in World War I?

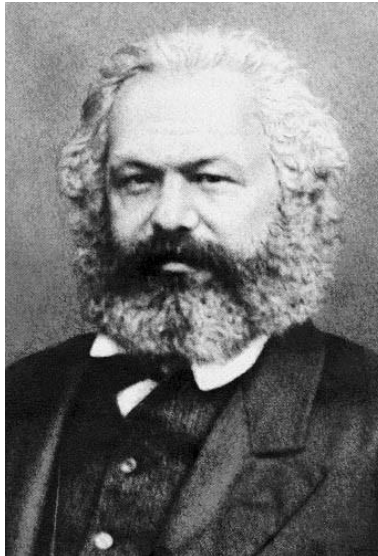
A stable hand is required to implement meaningful change. That is why the American revolutionaries succeeded and their French counterparts did not. The French Revolution descended into the Reign of Terror and self-destructed, with the first Napoleon picking up the pieces. As a result, democracy (or republicanism, as it was then called) was discredited in

Europe for nearly a century. Nietzsche should have been more responsible in his pronouncements.

A good writer he was, but at political philosophy he failed: For philosophy literally means love of wisdom, and Nietzsche could not embrace that concept, rejecting its conventionality.

Nietzsche's chief merit lies in his recognition and popularization of the fact that the human psyche is subject to primal urges. His Zarathustra proclaimed the downfall of society, a prophecy that would be realized within 14 years of the author's death.

His primary talent was dramatizing the intellectual plight of his era. It fell to his countryman Karl Marx to lay down the challenge to the excesses of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialism, with the *Communist Manifesto*. The fascist and communist followers of both men brought about bloody revolution and war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their deception and murdering ways ultimately brought democracy to the forefront. But could there have been another, less costly way to this resolution? Could things have turned out (even slightly) differently had Nietzsche been more responsible? We will never know. In today's Germany he stands mostly discredited.



That being said, the Wikipedia biography notes that Nietzsche's influence "remains substantial... notably in existentialism, nihilism and postmodernism." Fortunately, the ruler-subject mentality seems to be rapidly subsiding in the Internet and face book age, evidenced by last year's Arab Spring. Primarily China and North Korea persist in this anachronism. Mill's liberties have mostly been enshrined in national and international institutions. In this aspect, Nietzsche's prelude to a philosophy of the future has thus been confined to the ash heap of history.

At his best he shone as an eloquent social critic who invited readers to step outside their comfort zone, examine conventional wisdoms, and to tolerate non-conformists. The power of Nietzsche's prose is likely to enchant generations to come, since he remains one of the best writers on social issues of the past 200 years. But, given his own psychological issues, all his pronouncements need to be taken with a grain of salt.



## A Note on *Mein Kampf*

Reinforced by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, many observers continue to hold the belief that Nietzsche's writings influenced Hitler in his ambitions of world conquest and extermination of the Jews. One recent example can be found on You Tube, in a short piece of stand up comedy by Ricky Gervais. To what extent is this view accurate?

Most of the answers can be found in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. He wrote the manifesto during imprisonment in the wake of his failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in October 1923.<sup>17</sup> The book contains two volumes. Volume 1, *Die Abrechnung* (a reckoning) deals with Hitler's childhood and youth in Vienna, then Munich, the first World War, revolutionary stirrings in defeated Germany at war's end, beginnings of political activity, the founding of the German Workers Party, causes of Germany's collapse, people and race (*Volk und Rasse*), and first developments in his National Socialist Workers Party or NSDAP. Volume 2 describes the NSDAP movement in more detail.

Hitler's childhood recollections make it clear that he was radicalized at an early age by his father's collection of patriotic magazines celebrating the creation of the German Reich in 1870.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, war and soldiering became his favorite hobbies. He developed his speech-making abilities as well among youths in the neighbourhood. His father died when he was 13 and his mother two years later. Hitler thus grew up without any parental authority, and academic failure followed by financial hardship furthered his fanaticism. Eking out a meagre living in Vienna with its anti-Semitic major only made things worse.

His anti-Semitism becomes apparent with ravings about Jewish world finance and alleged collusion with communists to bring revolution to defeated Germany in 1919. This allegation is ridiculous: The Spartacus Bund wanted to bring Soviet-style rule to Bavaria, campaigning against finance and the merchant class, occupied by many Jewish citizens. The two groups hated each other.

Marx and Trotsky were Jewish, as well as the German Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau (1867-1922), assassinated by right-wing thugs. Apparently these coincidences were enough for Hitler to see a world conspiracy at work. Other than financial and racial, he did not give reasons for his hatred in *Mein Kampf*.

Hitler did not mention Nietzsche in his polemic, and an open discussion of the latter's ideas during Nazi times (1933-45) did not take place. However, the two shared at least three traits: Emphasis on the will, anti-intellectualism, and elitism. Nazi ideology promoted the development of the body over the mind. Educated people were not a priority. This becomes clear in *Mein Kampf*, as Hitler states in the preface that he did not expect many people to read his work, and that speeches would likely be more effective in rousing the masses.

He also states that ruling is best done alone, without messy parliamentary debates. This is why Hitler combined the offices of the chancellor and president the same day that Reich president Hindenburg died. Ironically, the Nazis came to power through parliamentary elections. Democracy can indeed produce undesirable results. Nietzsche saw this as well in *Human, All-Too Human*, but his emphasis was on protecting those who do not go along with the majority.

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<sup>17</sup> Seven years before Elisabeth Nietzsche became a supporter of his party.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche found no cause for celebration in that milestone.

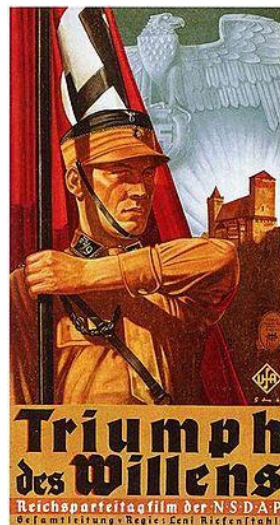
In foreign policy *Mein Kampf* advocates alliances with England and Italy. France is the mortal enemy, and Soviet Russia cannot be trusted. But during World War II, England was among the first to declare war on Nazi Germany, and Hitler made a (albeit short-lived) nonaggression pact with Stalin. Hitler thus appeared to be more of a disciple of Machiavelli, yet he alienated potential allies one by one, by placing land gains and racial purification above all else.<sup>19</sup>

The publisher claimed in 1943 that over ten million copies of *Mein Kampf* were in circulation. Hitler's diatribes and misinformation continue to be distributed freely through the Internet, even though Germany has banned the book. White supremacist web sites enthusiastically propagate the falsehoods to their fanatic followers. Will it ever end? Some of it has; in his *Schlußwort*, Hitler proclaims:

*Ein Staat, der im Zeitalter der Rassenvergiftung sich der Pflege seiner besten rassischen Elemente widmet, muß eines Tages zum Herrn der Erde werden.*

With the freedom to move about, multiculturalism and social interactions between people of different ethnic backgrounds are here to stay in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a development which Nietzsche foresaw under democratic auspices.

Given the declaration in *Ecce Homo* quoted on page 7, Gervais might have had a point in linking the holocaust to Nietzsche. The two certainly shared a love of war, even though it is questionable that this kind of brutality is what Nietzsche had in mind with his ideas on eugenics. Hitler certainly read him, but he appeared to be more influenced by Plato and Rousseau, in addition to Bismarck and the Anti-Semites.



In *The Republic* Plato called the tyrant and tyranny “the finest and fairest of all men and all states.” Russell commented that Plato was virtually a fascist.<sup>20</sup> And Rousseau's General Will came to life with Hitler's Nazi Party. Those who would not submit to it could be put to death.

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, on the other hand, foresaw the emergence of a European identity and a legitimate role for Jews in it.

<sup>20</sup> *The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age*, 1964

Nietzsche's outlook was certainly authoritarian, but he stopped short of totalitarianism as practiced by Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. The totalitarians trampled too much on society's cultural integrity.

The table below summarizes differences and commonalities of opinion between Nietzsche and Hitler:

<b>Differences: Nietzsche</b>	<b>Vs. Hitler</b>	<b>Commonalities</b>
Cosmopolitan outlook; state can wither away	Nationalistic outlook	Elitism
Envisions emergence of European race	German race superior	Celebrate war
Acknowledges intellect and work ethic of Jewish people	Anti-Semite: Hates Jews	Speak of purity of blood lines
Sees cultural vitality as essential	Sees state supremacy as essential – culture secondary	Use of the term <i>Entartung</i> *
Scientific view of natural environment (complex)	Simplistic view of natural environment (genetic purity)	Stress the power of will
The irrational must be recognized in human affairs	The irrational must be celebrated	Against idealism and logic
Quotes foreign intellectuals	Quotes German intellectuals	Low opinion of human intellect/nature in general
Obsessed with decadence	Obsessed with enemies	Conflict perspective

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\* The term has been translated as *degeneration*, i.e. a development that takes away from the integrity of culture/kinship for Nietzsche, or *racial purity* for Hitler.

## Conclusion

Researching Nietzsche once more has brought me to a similar conclusion as in 1985, when I first prepared an essay on his works and influence for a Carleton University history course. It remains difficult to assess how lucid he was when he wrote (particularly the later works), although Solomon and Higgins maintain that this was not a factor in evaluating his statements.<sup>21</sup>

The physical agonies induced by progressive syphilis seem to have sharpened his tone. The statement about getting rid of degenerates and parasites remains deeply troubling. It could well have been Exhibit A for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, when it named Nietzsche as an influence in war crimes and the holocaust. On January 17, 1946, he was cited thus:

His vision of the masses being governed without constraints by the rulers presaged the Nazi regime. Nietzsche believed in the supreme race and the primacy of Germany in which he saw a young soul and inexhaustible reserves.<sup>22</sup>

Such notoriety did not lead to the banning of his works in Germany, as happened with *Mein Kampf*. Rather, it contributed to an ongoing fascination by the camps of the skinheads, right wingers, non-conformists and skeptics. Nietzsche's wit occasionally entices readers to disregard some of his more outrageous pronouncements.

That said, he certainly did not have a monopoly on dangerous ideas. Rousseau's advocacy of a state religion, Machiavelli's promotion of deception, Hobbes' advocacy of totalitarianism, even Plato's blueprint of abolishing the family – which the early Bolsheviks considered in Soviet Russia – continue to cast dark shadows over the skies of the political firmament everywhere. Like Nietzsche, they all proposed a new perspective and morality to guide society.

The main difference remains Friedrich's adoption of Social Darwinism in attempting to remold people. He predicted that this process could take a couple of hundred years. Let us hope he was wrong. The 1948 UN-sponsored Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a direct outcome of the Nuremberg trials. Even though often ignored by rogue regimes, its provisions remain vastly superior to Nietzsche's alternative blueprint. The Preamble contains the following passages:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law...

The concept of inalienable rights that cannot be forfeited through electoral fiat has thus become entrenched in many constitutions across the globe. But the tension between leadership and minority rights continues. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the world's economic powerhouse, China – the

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<sup>21</sup> Solomon and Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, 2000

<sup>22</sup> As cited in Sautet, *Nietzsche for Beginners*, p. 189.

oppressor of Tibet – has yet to become a democracy that respects those who disagree with the ruling party line.

Nietzsche's prose and excesses will haunt us for some time to come. Among other developments, the cloning controversies of recent years have made his untimely observations relevant again.

Ottawa, April 2012

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You Tube videos featuring Nietzsche and Ricky Gervais